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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 003695

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV KISL I2

SUBJECT: SENIOR SISTANI REP IN DHI QAR EXPRESSES CITIZEN
FRUSTRATION WITH RELIGIOUS PARTIES

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor John Fox for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: PRT met with Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, s senior representative in Dhi Qar, Sayyid Majeed Jassim, on November 18. Sayyid Majeed and PRT had agreed at a previous lunch to collaborate to assist mosques in poor neighborhoods. After discussing the mosque project, Sayyid Majeed expressed his views and those of Sistani on a range of issues from reconstruction and provincial elections to Iranian influence. He expressed a general frustration with the religious parties that gained power in the last elections and called on neighboring countries to participate in the development of Iraq to counter Iranian influence. End Summary.

Provincial Elections

¶2. (C) Sayyid Majeed is looking forward to the upcoming provincial elections. Working under the guidance of Sistani, Sayyid Majeed encourages citizens in Dhi Qar to participate and take advantage of their newly found right to vote. He expressed his personal view that Iraqis were learning from their previous experience three years ago and will not vote for religious parties. He said he worked to explain to people the importance of voting for individuals who could do the most for their constituents. He thought the overall feeling among Iraqis in Dhi Qar was that their votes in 2005 were wasted. Sayyid Majeed joked that Iraqis are new to this type of open democracy and will learn as they go; he cited previous elections where the only name on the ballot was Saddam Hussein.

Iranian Influence

¶3. (C) When asked about the future of inter-Shi'a relations between the Najaf and Qom schools, Sayyid Majeed independently brought up international criticism of Iranian influence in Iraq. He expressed disappointment that Arab nations had not moved quickly to assist in the development of Iraq as it opened up to the world after 2003. He viewed Iran as only having influence in Iraq because Iran is currently the only neighboring country that has been willing to get involved in development and financing. Sayyid Majeed welcomed both personally and on behalf of Sistani, other countries and specifically Arab countries to come to Iraq to help it rebuild. By having other players in Iraq he felt the level of influence of Iran would diminish. Sayyid Majeed saw no long term flashpoints of real concern between the Najaf and Qom schools and gave anecdotes about how two people could see the same thing in different ways without it leading to conflict. He expressed a general openness to people from other religions as well, to include those of the Jewish faith. He even listed Jews among those whom he would welcome to Iraq to help rebuild.

Sistani Support for PRT Efforts

¶4. (C) After discussing religion and politics, PRT took Sayyid Majeed on a tour of ongoing agricultural training and the Mobile Surgical Unit (MSU) at the PRT Training Center. He expressed surprise and delight at the various activities we had undertaken. He even chastised the local journalist accompanying us for not doing a better job of publicizing all the collaborative efforts the PRT had undertaken with the Dhi Qar Governorate. He asked to have a photo of himself with the PRT in front of the MSU to be published in the local papers with the headline, "Al-Sistani Supports PRT Efforts."

¶5. (C) Comment: As a representative of Sistani, Sayyid Majeed's moderate views did not come as a surprise but were still refreshing to hear. The PRT will continue to engage with Sayyid Majeed to build other opportunities for collaboration. He was clearly at ease speaking with the PRT at the training center and asked us to visit him at his mosque for our next meeting. End Comment.

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